Students in a French class at Smith College use live video conferencing and Web cameras in a class this semester that brought them into contact with a college class in Paris. The class instructor called the first-of-its-kinds class at Smith an opportunity for “living culture.”

Students make connections across cultures

By SARA PLACZEK

NORTHAMPTON — Sitting in a neat semicircle in front of two television screens, with high-tech video equipment to their left and right, a handful of Smith students in Friday’s French 250 “Cross-Cultural Connections” class stared anxiously at a box wrapped in brown paper in the middle of the floor.

Candace Walton, the class instructor, directed her students to the television monitors. Across the Atlantic in Paris, James Benenson and his small group of engineering students at Ecole Normale Superieure de Telecommunications waved and said hello.

Walton’s French class, “Cross-Cultural Connections,” is the first of its kind at Smith. The class uses live webcam or video conferencing each Friday to enhance the students’ French listening and speaking skills, and also provides them with a sense of the country’s people and culture.

“Typically we have the students set up at individual computers equipped with a webcam where they converse in groups of three and four so it is more personal,” Walton says. “But occasionally we will do a group video conferencing session like this.”

The class works much the same for Benenson’s Parisian students who are learning English as their second language primarily to further their careers.

“This exchange is like living culture for both groups of students rather than learning about cultural differences in a dry textbook,” Walton says.

“Our class also meets on Monday and Wednesday during the week and we spend that time on class exercises” Walton says. “Friday is a chance for the students to use what we’ve discussed in class and apply it to live cultural conversation.”

Before each webcam or video conferencing session begins, each instructor agrees on a cultural topic for discussion. At this particular meeting each class sent the other a box containing small gifts representing the ‘students’ personal interests or their country’s culture. One by one, the items were taken out of the box and each group explained to the other the significance of the gifts.

“We allow the students to choose the language they are most comfortable speaking in because we want both groups of students to experience authentic English and authentic French, because there are obvious differences in the spoken language and the written language,” Walton says.

As the students in Paris opened their box, wrapped in white paper, they were amazed at their American friends with the French version of “Happy Birthday” and both groups erupted in laughter.

Benenson’s students pulled out a variety of items, including American music CDs, a Smith College newspaper and the book “Chicken Soup for the Soul.” One of the items that received the most positive response was a package of Oreo cookies.

“Oh those are good!” exclaimed one of Benenson’s students.

Walton’s students opened their box as eagerly as the students in Paris had and found similar items: French music CDs, a French children’s book, and France’s version of the Oreo cookies, “BN” cookies.

“I think that when people study foreign languages it also becomes a study of oneself through the way one decides to present his or her culture,” Walton says.

“The hour passes quickly each Friday, and many of the students on both sides enjoy their time together so much they often stay after class to continue talking.”

“James and I never interrupt individual discussions because we want the students to be able to gain a personal and cultural connection that they would not have the opportunity to experience unless they study abroad,” said Walton. “They all have made good friends.”

Smith plans to offer the course again in the fall.

At Mount Holyoke College, a similar cross-continent video conferencing experience also was started this spring. Susan Scotto, senior lecturer of Russian studies, got the idea after accompanying her students on a study-abroad program in Russia last fall.

The video-conferencing sessions allow her students to converse with students from the Wex English Institute in the city of Tver in northwest Russia.

Like Walton’s French class, Scotto said her students enjoy talking with their peers about popular culture and that the video-conferencing adds another dimension to language proficiency.

“The ultimate goal of foreign language is to be able to speak it. Speaking in a relaxed atmosphere with natives of the language allows us to put this goal in action,” said Scotto.

The students have videoconferenced five times this semester, and Scotto said the exchange will continue next fall.